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THE HUMAN STRIKE AND THE POLITICS OF ESCAPE

NONMUSIC DARK DELEUZE, DELEUZE, DELEUZE/GUATTARI, HUMAN STRIKE, MARXISM, POLITICS OF ESCAPE

Transcript of a short talk I gave @ b-books for the German book launch of *Dark Deleuze* in Berlin.

Introduction

The terms of escape, opacity, and indiscernibility are perhaps three of the most essential concepts that constitute the lexicon of *Dark Deleuze*; a lexicon that seeks to refute and replace the consensus of Deleuze as a thinker of affirmation, of joyous affects, and lover of rhizomes. If this is so, readers may find the text's development of these terms merely suggestive, especially since the notion of escape is given its most interesting treatment in the final passages of the text's concluding chapter. However, as I hope to show, these concepts of escape, opacity, and indiscernibility, gain in significance insofar as we understand them in relation to the interlocutors Andrew brings together in his reading of Deleuze; and particularly the work of the Paris based art collective Claire Fontaine (and to a lesser extent Tiqqun) whose names appear at key moments in the development of this politics of escape.

1. Escape, Opacity, Indiscernibility

To begin, we can ask the following question: how are we to understand a politics of escape in light of *Dark Deleuze*'s argument that Deleuze, has always been, a partisan of the anti-state communist tradition? At the outset we can say that escape is not to be confused with some generalized notion of deterritorialization or even with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of lines of flight. To escape requires lines of flight, but the two are not one and the same. For Andrew, escape is given a decidedly political inflection where lines of flight pertain to the objective tendencies of the world that, if taken to their logical conclusions, force a qualitative change of the situation:

> *Escape* is never more exciting than when it spills out into the streets, where trust in appearances, trust in words, trust in each other, and trust in this world all disintegrate in a mobile zone of indiscernibility (Fontaine, 'Black Bloc'). It is these moments of opacity…and breakdown that darkness most threatens the ties that bind us to this world. (*Dark Deleuze*, 70)

Regarding this passage it is worth noting the reference to Claire Fontaine and her writing on the black bloc, which suggests to the reader that between Fontaine and this *Dark Deleuze* there is something in common. What both Fontaine and *Dark Deleuze* hold in common is their antipathy toward those who envision the task of Thinking being one of adequate description, or the verification of conceptual representations. In contrast to these positions that equate thinking with representing/describing the world, Fontaine and Deleuze assert that before all else Thinking is a response to a problem whose nature is political. Or as Deleuze and Guattari write in the 8th chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, '…politics precedes Being' (*ATP*, 203). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the reason for the reference to Fontaine's work is because it is Fontaine who develops a key distinction that is implied in *Dark Deleuze*'s conclusion and one that will allow us to understand how the three terms of escape, opacity, and indiscernibility relate to one another. In her essay 'This is not the black bloc' Fontaine distinguishes between what is ontologically indiscernible and that which is politically indiscernible. As she writes:

> A distinctive feature of one who finds themselves in what we call a black bloc is to demand nothing for themselves or for others, to cut across public space without being subjected to it for once, to disappear in a mass or factory exists and public transportation at rush hour…*In this night where all demonstrators look alikethere is no point in posing Manichean questions. Especially since we know that the distinction between guilty and innocent no longer matters, all that counts is the one between winners and losers.* (Claire Fontaine, 'This is not the black bloc')

A world of difference, then, keeps apart the fabled 'night in which all cows are black' from the night of insurrection 'where all demonstrators look alike'. Regarding the former, we find ourselves *disabled* in the face of pure immediacy. In this situation, there is nothing about the world that allows us to distinguish something from anything else; a cause from its effect; a principle from its consequences. However, in the night where all demonstrators look alike, we find ourselves *enabled* in our confrontation with capital's imposed daily rhythm and its state apparatuses of capture. For example, while one may ordinarily be subjected to 'random' stops by the police or even the violence that always arrives at demonstrations, the indiscernibility of the black bloc affords this mass of individuals more opportunities for attack and resisting arrest than if they were to assume the transparency model of peaceful protest and orderly conduct. Fontaine continues:

> I could tell you that dressing in black meant: we are all comrades, we are all in solidarity, we are all alike, and this equality liberates us from the responsibility of accepting a fault we do not deserve: the fault of being poor in a capitalist country, the fault of being anti-fascist in the fatherland of Nazism, the fault of being libertarian in a repressive country. That it meant: nobody deserves to be punished for these reasons, and since you are attacking us we are forced to protect ourselves from violence when we march in the streets. (Fontaine, 'This is not the black bloc')

Now the relevance of distinguishing between the ontological and the political with respect to *Dark Deleuze*'s larger argument can be seen in two ways. First, regarding the question of philosophical/theoretical commitments, Andrew asserts that opacity, indiscernibility, and escape cannot simply be affirmed as an ontological category without lapsing back into all the errors of the affirmationist readings he is at pains to refute; without reviving all those positions which imagine Deleuze as the beautiful soul who tries, to no avail, to discover the intrinsic value of the Hegelian 'night in which all cows are black'; or the thinker *par excellence* whose thought fails to move beyond platitudes such as 'we're all the same because we all share the same fate' or that 'everything, in this day and age, is connected to everything else.' As Deleuze himself remarks already as early as *Difference and Repetition*, '…the philosophy of difference must be wary of turning into the discourse of beautiful souls: differences, nothing but differences, in a peaceful coexistence in the Idea of social places and functions … but the name of Marx is sufficient to save it from this danger' (*Difference and Repetition*, 207).

So, if indiscernibility and escape are never guaranteed or simply given to us in our experience of the World, it is because they are the concepts one must create out of that which is given in the present conjuncture. It is for this reason that *Dark Deleuze* follows Fontaine in maintaining that these concepts are not to be understood as ontological descriptors. Thus, indiscernibility and opacity are tools to be devised and put in the service of the struggle of *Dark Deleuze*'s larger task of world destruction. Or what amounts to the same: they are tools to be used in the task of actualizing, as Marx put it, that real movement which abolishes the present state of things. Now, while *Dark Deleuze*'s develops a decidedly political notion of escape through its references to Fontaine's work, the writings of Tiqqun, as well as a number of other thinkers[1], this is not a conception of politics solely limited to black bloc types of actions. To be precise, and in the terms laid out by the text itself, the black bloc is the embodiment of opacity and indiscernibility. Thus, we should say, opacity and indiscernibility; the existence of the black bloc; all these aid a politics of escape but do not constitute the substance, or the content, of escape as such.

2. Escape as withdrawal from the social

So… escape must mean more than simply dressing in black as means of defense. According to Andrew, and against

these reductive interpretations that treat indiscernibility as both a means and an end-in-itself, what those who escape seek is the withdrawal of their existence from the demands of both production and reproduction. Here we encounter a notion of escape that means something similar to a withdrawal, or secession, of one's complicity in the present state of affairs. And so we shouldn't be surprised when Andrew goes on to formulate escape in precisely these terms, 'And then there are those who escape. Crafting new weapons while *withdrawing from the demands of the social*...' (*Dark Deleuze*, 69, my emphasis). In light of this definition of escape, it would be more precise to say that the politics of escape offered in *Dark Deleuze* puts the virtues of opacity and indiscernibility at the service of a collective withdrawal from the social (for as much as we may wish, one cannot be a participant in a black bloc *ad infinitum*). Thus, if to escape means to withdraw from the demands of the social, it turns out that *Dark Deleuze*'s politics of escape is closer to another of Claire Fontaine's concepts. For Fontaine, like *Tiqqun* before her, to withdraw from the social is to engage in what they call a 'Human Strike'. As Fontaine writes,

> The term ***"human strike"... defines a type of strike that involves the whole life and not only its professional side, that acknowledges exploitation in all the domains and not only at work***...The subject isn't the proletarian or the factory worker but the whatever singularity that everyone is. This movement isn't there to reveal the exceptionality...of a group on another but to unmask the whateverness of everybody as the open secret that social classes hide. (Claire Fontaine, Human Strike, 4)

The Human Strike, we can say, is a kind of strike that begins by posing the problem of the abolition of capital in the following terms: *How can strikes been utilized outside of the employer-employee relation* (e.g. in the context of migrant-life, the lives of racialized and gendered subjects, and so on)? While strikes have historically taken the form of the general or mass strike, which wages its struggle at the point of *production* (workplace/factory), the Human Strike takes place at any and all points of social *reproduction* (home, school, relations amongst friends, cultural platforms, media, neighbourhood in terms of rent strikes, etc.). As Tiqqun write

> The general strike meant that exploitation was limited in time and space, that alienation was partial, due to a recognizable enemy, and thus beatable. Human strike replies to an age in which the limits between work and life are fading away [...] Empire is when the means of production have become means of control at the very same time that the opposite revealed itself to be the case. Empire means that in all things the political moment *dominates* the economic one. A general strike is helpless against this. What must be opposed to Empire is a human strike. Which never attacks relations of production without attacking at the same time the affective knots which sustain them...the human strike is that strike which PREFERS NOT TO. That slips away from the assemblage. That saturates it or explodes it. Pulls itself together, preferring *something else*. Something else that does not belong to the authorized possibilities of the assemblage. ("Comment Faire", *Tiqqun 2*, Zone d'opacité offensive)

Now, despite the differences between the general strike and the human strike, what allows Fontaine to categorize the human strike as a strike nonetheless is the fact that the actions of the general and Human strike share something essential in common: both seek to withhold a service, to subtract one's participation in a process that perpetuates exploitation and alienation, as a means of instituting a rupture so polarizing that one would find themselves in a situation where only two possible positions exist: to either be *for* or *against* the human strike. Or in the language of *Dark Deleuze*, to either be *for* or *against* bringing about an end to this world. So if it's with the Human Strike that we approach an adequate vision of *Dark Deleuze*'s politics of escape, how does this escape relate back to Andrew's image of Deleuze as an anti-state communist? That is, what concept or term from the Deleuzian corpus could we point to as belonging to Andrew's, Fontaine's, and Tiqqun's wager on a total and collective withdrawal from the demands of the social? It is my claim that it is with the concept of becoming-minoritarian as formulated in *A Thousand Plateaus* that best captures what is at stake in *Dark Deleuze*'s politics of escape. Importantly, to engage in a becoming-minoritarian is not the same type of collective action found in a 'molecular revolution. For Andrew, the truth of Tiqqun's claim that 'the revolution was molecular, and so was the counter-revolution' still holds for our present moment. However, 'becoming-minoritarian' is the concept adequate to this politics of escape not simply because D&G claim that 'Becoming-minoritarian as the universal figure of consciousness is called autonomy' (*ATP*, 106). More importantly, a becoming-minoritarian is a form of collective subjectivity that has the potential to effectuate a rupture that institutes a polarized situation between itself and the world. This rupture that only offers one the option of being *for* or *against* this world; is this not what D&G mean when they write the following:

> It is always astounding to see the same story repeated: the modesty of minorities' initial demands, coupled with the impotence of the axiomatic to resolve the slightest corresponding problem. In short, the struggle around axioms is most important when it manifests, itself opens, the gap between two types of propositions, propositions of flows and propositions of axioms. The power of minorities is not measured by their capacity to enter and make themselves felt within the majority system...but to bring to

> bear the force of the non-denumerable sets…against the denumerable sets (*ATP*, 471).

Thus, becoming-minoritarian, plotting an escape from the world that effects a situation where one is always a partisan to something – whether that something is minoritarian struggles or being complicit in the capitalist-state; it is in this way that our withdrawal from the demands of the social has the potential to effect a qualitative break with the world. It is also in this way that *Dark Deleuze,* following Fontaine, poses the question of how best to strike given the present conjuncture in terms of struggles that concerns the whole of life and not simply the portion of life defined by our labour-time. And this is one of the ways we can understand that *Dark Deleuze*'s politics of escape is geared toward world destruction, since Andrew's interpretation begins from the admission that, today, we find ourselves in situations where we are no longer able to distinguish between life and work; between labour-time and leisure-time; between alienation and the freedom from having to be a subject.

3. Human Strike-as-the-Politics-of-Escape

Regarding this theme of the conflation of labour-time and leisure-time, I'll conclude with a quotation from Nanni Balestrini's novel *We Want Everything*, which gives a vivid description of a form-of-life where the time of life (of leisure, reproduction, friendship) is continuously put in the service of the time of capital (of accumulation, dispossession, wage-relation). Balestrini writes,

> I had never got May Day – la festa del lavoro: what a joke, the festival of work…I didn't get why work should be celebrated…when I didn't work I didn't know what…to do, because I was a worker, that is, someone who spent the greater part of his day in the factory, and with what was left all I could do was rest up for the next day (Nanni Balestrini, *We Want Everything*, 59).

So, whether one calls it escape, withdrawal, or the Human Strike, we know we are speaking of the same thing: we are speaking of how concepts such as opacity and indiscernibility are tactics embodied in a black bloc; how these concepts are not to be taken as ontological descriptions and cannot be conflated with that of escape. In any event, the essential claim is this: these practical concepts are to be put in the service of *destroying everything in the world that seeks to destroy you*; destroying what forces you to feel ashamed for wanting to live otherwise; and for destroying the conditions that bring us to the point of physical or mental exhaustion – regardless if this takes place in the office or the home; regardless if it is suffered at the hands of friends, family, or worst of all our enemies.

"It is worth mentioning that the privilege granted to this polarizing notion of difference for politics finds a precursor in the work of Rosa Luxemburg, and particularly in her essay 'The Russian Revolution', where she gives the following characterization regarding the nature of revolutionary activity: "The "golden mean" cannot be maintained in any revolution. The law of its nature demands a quick decision: either the locomotive drives forward full steam ahead to the most extreme point…or it rolls back of its own weight again to the starting point at the bottom; and those who would keep it with their weak powers half way [sic] up the hill, it but drags down with it irredeemably into the abyss" (Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, 289). It is not by accident that another of Luxemburg's essays ('The Mass Strike') informs my larger argument regarding the connection between Dark Deleuze's politics of escape and Claire Fontaine's /Tiqqun's notion of the 'Human Strike'. While it is beyond the time and space for this talk I would simply note that Plan C is a present day organization that belongs to this history of thinking through how Strike's can be effective for the present. What we have been calling the 'Human Strike' is what Plan C has recently called the Transnational Social Strike. For more see Kier Milburn's article with Plan C '2017: The Year of the Social Strike' which can be found here."

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[1] If *Dark Deleuze* opts for the polarizing logic of exclusive disjunctions, it finds few allies. For this reason it is worth mentioning that the privilege granted to this polarizing notion of difference for politics finds a precursor in the work of Rosa Luxemburg, and particularly in her essay 'The Russian Revolution', where she gives the following characterization regarding the nature of revolutionary activity: "The "golden mean" cannot be maintained in any revolution. The law of its nature demands a quick decision: either the locomotive drives forward full steam ahead to the most extreme point…or it rolls back of its own weight again to the starting point at the bottom; and those who would keep it with their weak powers half way [sic] up the hill, it but drags down with it irredeemably into the abyss" (Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, 289).

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